

AI Ireland 2026:

The State of AI in Irish Business

Mark Kelly, Founder of AI Ireland



IRELAND

Table of Contents

Section	Description	Page
Introduction	Overview of the 130 AI leaders surveyed and the report's goals for 2026.	3
Executive Dashboard	High-level summary of top goals, blockers, adoption status, and data stances.	3
Survey Demographics	Breakdown of participant roles and company sizes, highlighting enterprise dominance.	4
Top AI Outcomes	Primary objectives for the next 6–12 months, including cost optimisation and staff assistance.	5
Adoption Maturity	Current status of Irish businesses moving from piloting into full-scale production.	6
Real-World Experiences	Qualitative feedback on where AI adds value and the human/technical challenges faced.	7
Current Blockers	Detailed look at the primary hurdles, such as technical integration and skill shortages.	8
90-Day Use Case Priorities	Immediate roadmap focus on proactive operations and financial efficiency.	9
Future of Generative AI	Stance of Irish leaders on using private company data with GenAI tools.	10
Summary & Strategic Insights	A closing look at the "readiness gap" and top recommendations for businesses.	11 & 12
AI Leadership Action Plan	A four-phase checklist for moving from AI curiosity to high-value production.	13
About AI Ireland	Information on the organisation and its founder, Mark Kelly.	14

Introduction

This report shows what AI leaders in Ireland think about Artificial Intelligence today. We talked to *130 leaders* to understand how they use AI, what they hope to achieve, and what is slowing them down. Our goal is to give a clear picture of AI in Ireland as we start the new year.

Executive Dashboard: AI Strategy 2026

Area	Category	Primary Focus / Insight	Key Metric
Top Goals	Cost Optimisation	Focus on spending smarter, Lead Generation, and Process Efficiency	27.70%
	Engineer Assistance	Using GenAI as a "massive productivity booster" for code generation.	19.20%
	Predictive Maintenance	Transitioning from reactive to proactive maintenance of equipment.	15.40%
Top Blockers	Integration Challenges	Technical difficulty merging AI with legacy/old company software.	24.60%
	Skills & Resources	Shortage of trained staff and lack of AI literacy at the leadership level.	15.30%
	Security Concerns	Data protection worries and focus on Regulatory Compliance (ISO 42001).	14.60%
Adoption Status	In Production	Combined percentage of organisations in "Early Production" or "Broad Adoption".	73.90%
Data Stance	Controlled Use	Leaders preferring strict rules and safe "sandbox" environments for company data.	56.20%

Who Took the Survey?

The people who answered our questions hold leadership roles in their companies.

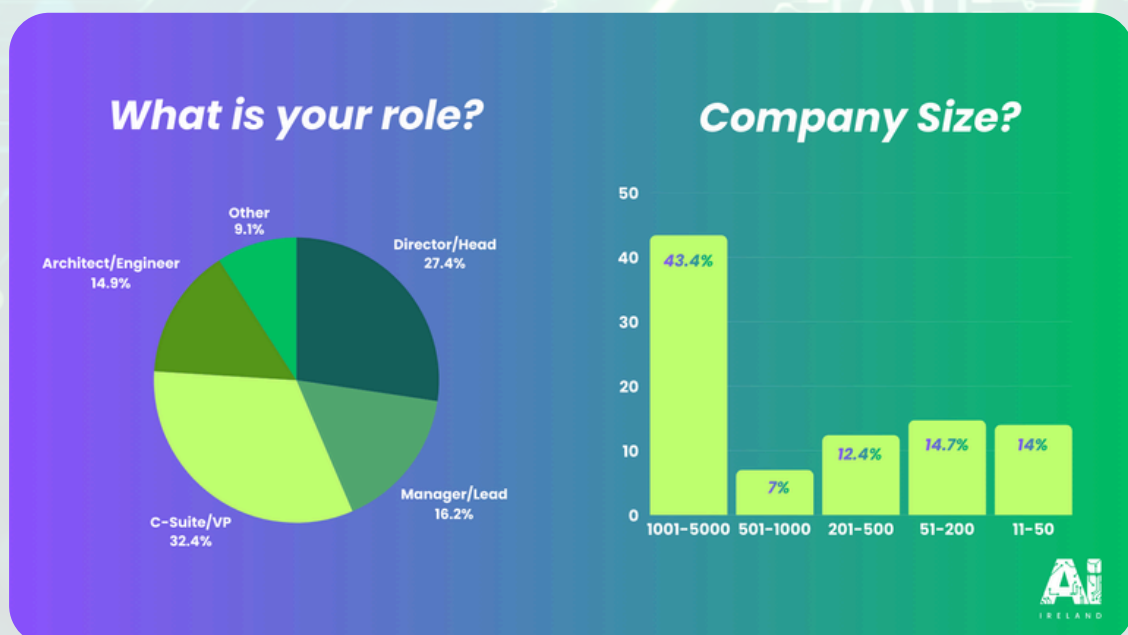
Roles: Most people (about 32%) are C-suite or VPs. Another 27% are Directors or Heads of departments.

Company Size: AI is very popular in big companies. Over 43% of the leaders work at companies with 1,001 to 5,000 employees. However, small businesses with 1 to 10 people also made up about 14% of the group.

Company Profile: Survey Demographics

The survey of 130 AI leaders in Ireland reflects a strong representation from large-scale enterprises, providing a "big business" perspective on AI adoption.

- **Enterprise Dominance:** Over 43% of respondents work for large companies with 1,001–5,000 employees. This suggests the survey findings are heavily influenced by organisations with significant resources and complex infrastructure.
- **Small to Mid-Sized Engagement:** There is a balanced distribution among smaller organisations, with roughly 14% each coming from companies with 1–10 employees and 51–200 employees.
- **Mid-Market Representation:** Mid-sized companies (201–1,000 employees) represent the smallest cohort, making up approximately 15% of the total combined.



Top Goals for the Next Year

Leaders have clear objectives for AI implementation over the next 6 to 12 months:

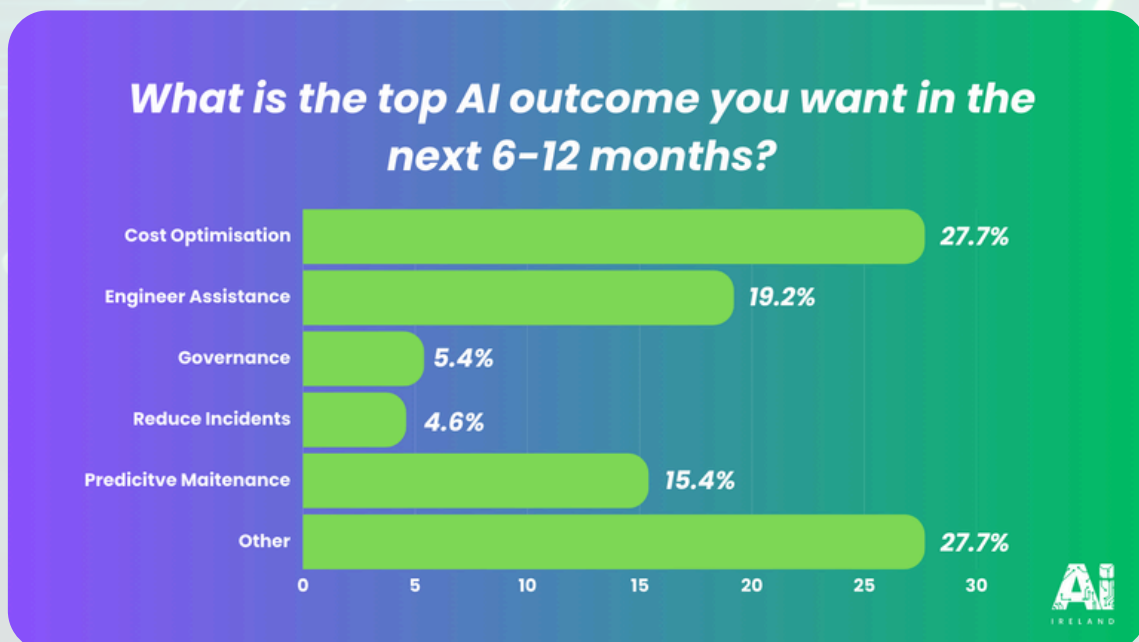
- **Saving Money:** The primary driver is Cost Optimisation (28%), as companies aim to use AI for smarter spending.
- **Helping Staff:** 19% of leaders want AI to assist their engineers, improving speed and performance.
- **Fixing Problems:** 15% are targeting Predictive Maintenance to identify equipment issues before they occur.

In-Depth: The "Other" Category (27.7%)

While the top three goals are clear, over a quarter of firms are pursuing niche innovations tailored to their specific industries.

These additional priorities include:

- **Strategic Automation:** Beyond simple tasks, leaders are entering the discovery phase for RPA (Robotic Process Automation), workflow automation and broader process efficiency initiatives.
- **Customer & Growth:** A significant focus is placed on revenue-generating and retention tools, specifically Lead Generation, Improved Customer XP (Experience) and Enhanced Product Features.
- **Advanced Analytics:** There is high interest in sophisticated data use, such as the predictive modelling of transaction volumes and general research/analysis to drive productivity.
- **Governance & Support:** To ensure safe scaling, leaders are prioritising Digital Assistance and the establishment of Clear Governance Oversight and Guidelines.



Adoption Maturity

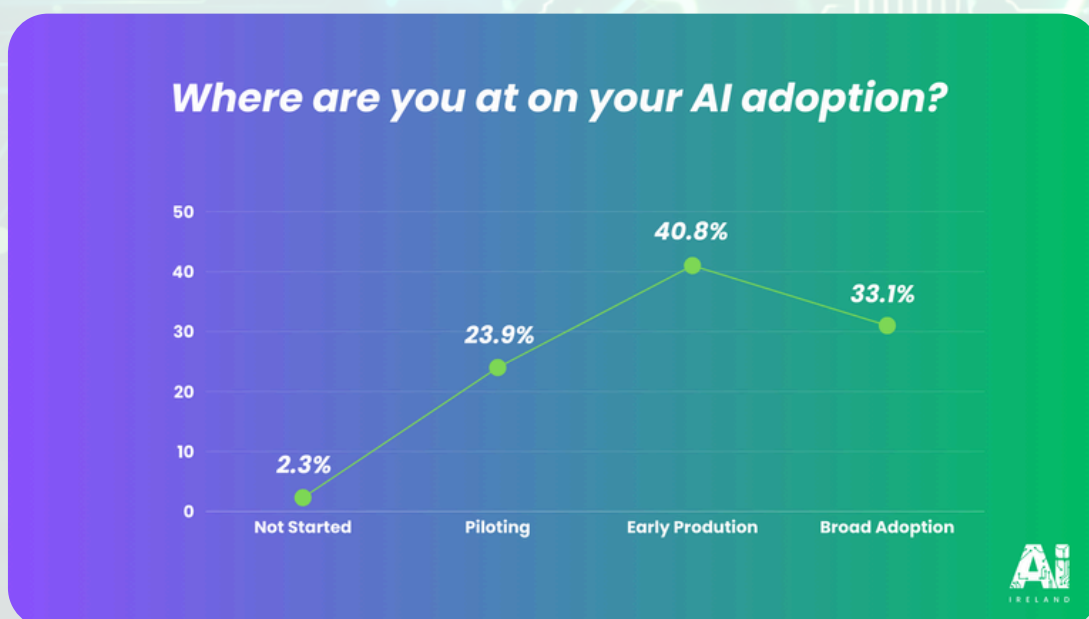
Irish businesses are no longer just experimenting; they are moving into full-scale implementation:

- **74% in Production:** Nearly three-quarters of respondents have moved AI into either early production (41%) or broad adoption (33%).
- **Active Testing:** 24% of leaders are currently in the piloting phase.
- **Near-Universal Engagement:** Only 2% of organisations have not yet started their AI journey.

What this tells us

Companies aren't asking "Should we use AI?" anymore.

The real challenge now is making AI work with existing systems, setting clear rules, and upskilling staff so they can use these tools properly.



The Voice of AI Leaders: Real-World Experiences

To gain deeper insight, we asked our 130 participants to describe the reality of their AI deployments. Their feedback reveals a landscape of high-value wins balanced by significant learning curves.

Where AI is Delivering Value

- **Engineering & Product:** Leaders report that GenAI is a "massive productivity booster" for generating code and enhancing app modernisation.
- **Initial Momentum:** Companies find AI "incredibly useful to get the ball rolling" and overcoming the initial friction of starting new tasks in sales and marketing.
- **Internal Operations:** MS Copilot is being used extensively for meeting preparation and managing supplier contracts.
- **Production Success:** Successful firms are moving past MVPs into production by building "demonstrated earned business value" that earns user trust.

The Challenges of Implementation

- **The "Slow" Reality:** Several leaders noted that projects are moving slower than originally predicted, requiring multiple iterations to find success.
- **The Human Element:** Success often depends on having "people who are okay with AI friction" and overcoming a "steep learning curve".
- **Technical Risks:** While code generation is a hit, CTOs warn that it requires even more rigorous code reviews to catch security issues or "tests that look good at a glance but don't properly test the logic".
- **Feature Fatigue:** A key strategic challenge is "striking the right balance" between feature-rich tools and those that "add more confusion than value".

The Governance Frontier

- **Regulation as a Priority:** A core focus for leaders is AI governance best practices, with some Irish firms already achieving ISO 42001 certification.
- **Awaiting Clarity:** There is a specific "wait and see" approach regarding EU AI Policy and Legislation, particularly within the healthcare sector.
- **Vendor Hype:** Leaders are navigating a market where "a lot of vendors are promising AI in roadmaps," requiring careful assessment of what is actually ready for use.

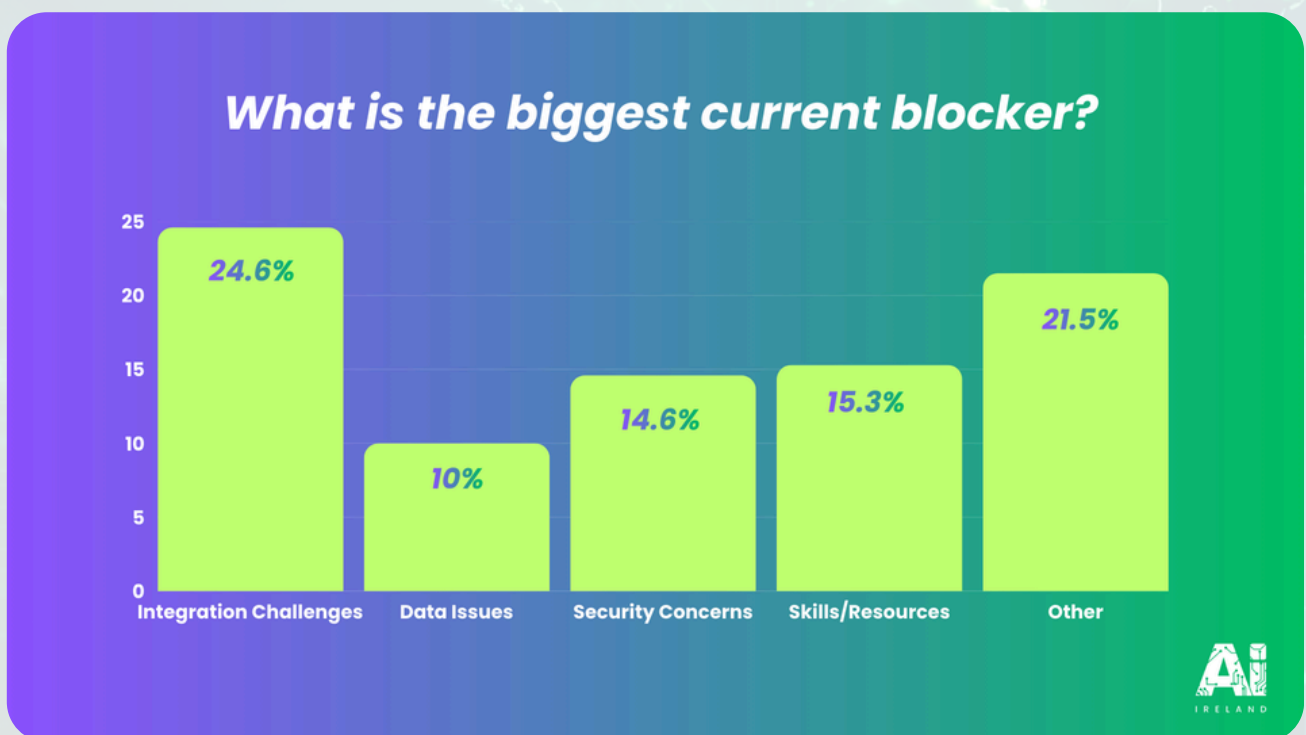
Strategic Insight Update

This qualitative data reinforces that while 74% of organisations are in production, the "readiness gap" is being closed through rigorous governance and a "learning-by-doing" approach.

What is blocking progress?

Even though leaders are excited, they face some "blockers" or challenges.

- **Fitting In:** The biggest problem is Integration Challenges (25%). This means it is hard to make new AI tools work with the old systems companies already have.
- **Skills:** 15% say they don't have enough people with the right AI skills.
- **Safety:** 15% are worried about security and keeping data safe.

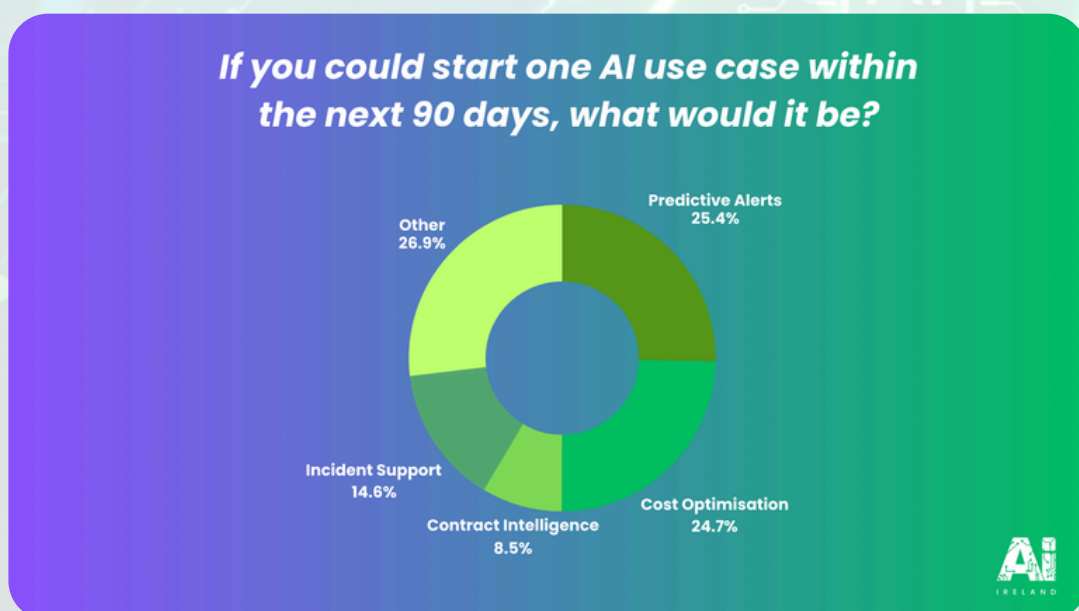


Top AI Use Case Priorities (90-Day Outlook)

The immediate roadmap for 130 AI leaders in Ireland focuses on transition from reactive to proactive operations.

- **Proactive Operations (25%):** "Predictive alerts" is the top-rated specific use case, showing a clear shift toward using AI as an early-warning system.
- **Financial Efficiency (25%):** "Cost optimisation" remains a dominant 90-day goal, reflecting a continued mandate to maximize ROI.
- **Response & Automation (23%):** Combined interest in "Incident support" (15%) and "Contract intelligence" (8%) highlights a drive to automate time-intensive administrative tasks.
- **Niche Innovation (27%):** A high volume of "Other" responses indicates that over a quarter of firms are building highly specialised solutions unique to their industry.

Strategic Insight: While the 90-day ambition is high, successful rollout will depend on overcoming integration challenges, which 25% of leaders identify as their single largest hurdle.

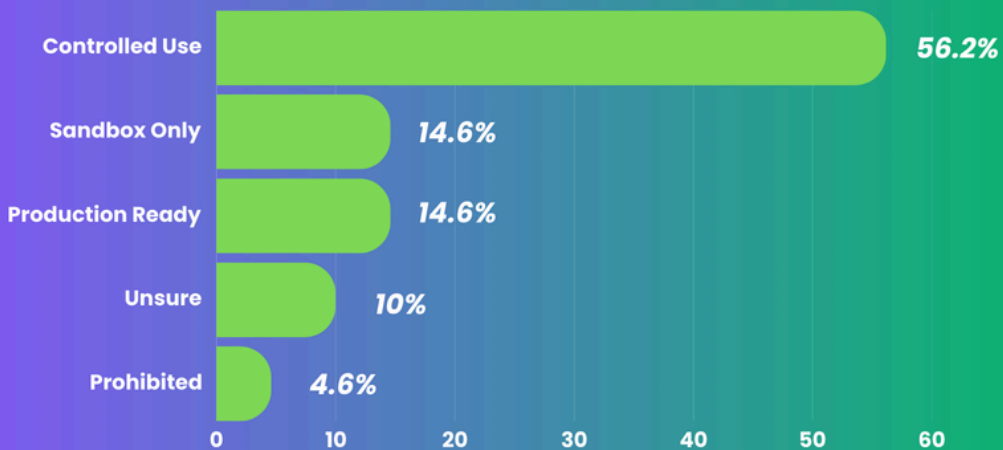


The Future of Generative AI (GenAI)

We asked how leaders feel about using Generative AI (like tools that write text or code) with their company's private data.

- **Controlled Use:** Most leaders (56%) prefer "controlled use". This means they use it, but with very strict rules to keep it safe.
- **Ready for Work:** 15% say they are "production ready" and fully trust it.
- **Testing Only:** Another 15% only use it in a "sandbox," which is a safe place to play and test without affecting the real business.

What is your stance on GenAI with Ops Data?



Summary: The State of Ireland in 2026

AI is growing fast in Ireland, moving beyond the testing phase into full-scale implementation to drive financial efficiency and team support. While technical hurdles remain, the focus for 2026 is on balancing rapid innovation with safe, governed use.

Goals vs. Blockers: At a Glance

The primary drive for AI in Ireland is financial efficiency, but the technical difficulty of merging new AI with legacy systems remains the top hurdle.

Top 3 AI Goals (6–12 Months)

1. **Cost Optimisation (28%)**: Spending smarter and saving money. Recent feedback shows this includes specific interests in Lead Generation and Process Efficiency.
2. **Engineer Assistance (19%)**: Helping technical teams work faster. Leaders highlight Code Generation as a "massive productivity booster".
3. **Predictive Maintenance (15%)**: Using data to fix problems before they happen.

Top 3 Current Blockers

1. **Integration Challenges (25%)**: Difficulty making AI work with old software. Leaders also cite ROI questions and Time to plan as critical friction points.
2. **Skills & Resources (15%)**: A shortage of trained people. This is compounded by a need for higher AI Literacy at the leadership level.
3. **Security Concerns (15%)**: Worries about protecting private data. This has led to a focus on Regulatory Compliance and ISO certifications.

Real-World Perspectives: How Projects are Progressing

Qualitative insights from the survey provide a more nuanced picture of the "readiness gap."

- **Trust Through Value**: Success is being achieved by moving from PoCs to production projects that add "demonstrated earned business value," which in turn builds user trust.
- **The Governance Mandate**: Governance is no longer an afterthought; leaders are actively prioritising ISO 42001 and awaiting clarity on EU AI Policy, especially in sensitive sectors like healthcare.
- **Operational Reality**: While tools like MS Copilot and GenAI for app modernisation are delivering immediate wins, leaders warn that projects often move "slower than originally predicted" and require multiple iterations to succeed.
- **The Quality Challenge**: As AI becomes central to product messaging, maintaining code quality and avoiding "features that add more confusion than value" are becoming the primary focus for CTOs.

Strategic Insight

The survey highlights a "readiness gap." While 41% of companies are already in the early stages of using AI for real work, many are finding that the biggest challenge isn't the AI itself, but rather the technical integration and lack of skilled staff needed to support it.

This data suggests that for 2026, the most successful Irish companies will be those that focus on upskilling their teams and updating their IT infrastructure to handle these new tools safely.

Top three recommendations for Irish businesses based on the survey findings:

1. Prioritise Technical Integration: Since 24.6% of leaders identify integration challenges as their top blocker, you should ensure your current IT systems are prepared to connect with new AI tools before beginning a project.

2. Focus on Cost and Efficiency: With 27.7% of leaders seeking cost optimisation and 19.2% aiming for engineer assistance, initial AI projects should focus on saving money and helping staff work more effectively.

3. Adopt a Safe "Controlled Use" Model: Because 56.2% of leaders prefer controlled use for company data, you should establish clear security rules and "sandbox" testing environments to manage risks like security concerns, which affect 14.6% of organisations.

AI Leadership Action Plan: Next Steps for 2026

Use this checklist to move from AI curiosity to high-value, governed production.

Phase 1: Alignment & Literacy (Months 0–1)

- Conduct an SLT Audit:** Assess AI literacy within the Senior Leadership Team and schedule focused briefing sessions to shift mindsets from curiosity to strategic execution.
- Appoint an AI Sponsor:** Assign a dedicated executive lead (e.g. CTO or Head of AI) to oversee technical integration and resource allocation.
- Define the "Why":** Document specific business challenges - like lead generation or process efficiency - that AI is intended to solve to ensure clear ROI.

Phase 2: Technical & Data Foundation (Months 1–3)

- Inventory Legacy Systems:** Identify "AI-ready" vs. "at-risk" legacy software to map out potential technical debt and integration challenges.
- Audit Data Lineage:** Map where operational data originates and ensure it is clean and accessible for model training to avoid data issues.
- Set Up a "Sandbox":** Create a secure, private environment for testing Generative AI tools with sensitive company data before moving to production.

Phase 3: Governance & Security (Months 3–6)

- Draft Ethical Guidelines:** Codify your company's stance on data privacy, bias mitigation, and human oversight for controlled use.
- Review Client Contracts:** Identify regulatory or contractual clauses that may impact the use of AI with third-party data.
- Pursue ISO 42001:** Begin the formal assessment process for AI management system certification to build market trust and meet EU AI Policy standards.

Phase 4: Scaling & Value (Month 6+)

- Transition PoCs to Production:** Move pilot projects into the business only after they demonstrate "earned business value" and accurate outcomes.
- Establish KPI Dashboards:** Track AI performance against measurable metrics like cost savings, quality improvement, or time-to-market.
- Launch Upskilling Programmes:** Roll out training to bridge the skills and resources gap identified by leadership.

About AI Ireland

AI Ireland is a national, independent community focused on helping Irish organisations understand and apply AI in a practical way.

We work with business leaders, public bodies and teams across Ireland to build AI skills, share real-world examples, and reduce the risk of failed AI projects.

Through research, events, training, and industry partnerships, AI Ireland helps organisations move from AI curiosity to confident, safe and valuable use of AI in day-to-day work.

Since 2018, AI Ireland has also hosted the AI Awards, celebrating real, applied AI projects and the teams using AI to deliver measurable impact across Irish business and society.

If you are interested in partnership opportunities, research collaboration, or supporting applied AI in Ireland, [get in touch with AI Ireland](#) to start the conversation.

About Mark Kelly, Founder at AI Ireland

Mark works with business leaders across Ireland and Europe to help organisations adopt AI in a practical, safe and commercially focused way.



Mark is an international keynote speaker, presenting to executive teams and industry groups on applied AI and AI readiness. He also hosts the AI Ireland Podcast, where he speaks with leaders about real-world AI use and lessons learned from live deployments.